

## “V”: ONE GESTURE, MANY MEANINGS — AN INTERCULTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE V-SIGN

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*The V-sign, a simple gesture made by raising the index and middle fingers in a “V” shape, is one of the most widely recognized symbols in the world. However, its meanings differ drastically across cultures. In many Western countries, it represents victory or peace, while in several Commonwealth nations it functions as a strong insult when the palm faces inward. This article explores the historical evolution, semiotic interpretation, and intercultural implications of the V-sign, illustrating how gestures acquire cultural specificity and contextual meaning. The discussion also emphasizes the importance of nonverbal awareness for global communication.*

**Introduction.** Nonverbal symbols form a core part of human interaction, shaping meaning beyond spoken language. Among these, hand gestures are particularly powerful because they travel easily across borders yet are deeply embedded in local culture (Matsumoto, 2020). The V-sign is an illustrative case: it can communicate victory, peace, or insult, depending on cultural context and hand orientation. This duality makes it a useful subject for studying intercultural communication and gesture interpretation.

**Historical Background of the V-Sign.** The V-sign gained its first major prominence during the Second World War. Belgian politician Victor de Laveleye proposed using the letter “V”—representing both “Victoire” (French for victory) and ‘vrijheid’ (Dutch for

freedom)—as a unifying symbol of resistance against Nazi occupation (Imperial War Museums, 2023). British Prime Minister Winston Churchill soon adopted the gesture, turning it into a public emblem of Allied perseverance and success (National WWII Museum, 2022). The sign became a morale-boosting visual cue associated with triumph and hope. After the war, its meaning shifted again during the 1960s counterculture movement, where anti-war activists in the United States reinterpreted it as the “peace sign” (History.com, 2023). Thus, within two decades, the same gesture transformed from a wartime victory salute into a symbol of nonviolent resistance.

**Cross-Cultural Divergence in Meaning.** Despite its widespread visibility, the V-sign’s meaning varies dramatically depending on orientation and geography (Table 1). When made with the palm facing outward, it typically signals “victory” or “peace.” However, when reversed—with the palm facing inward—it carries a vulgar connotation in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa (Business Insider, 2021). In these cultures, the reversed V-sign is comparable to showing the middle finger in the United States, functioning as a nonverbal insult. The difference hinges entirely on the hand’s orientation, showing how subtle visual changes can alter meaning completely.

**Table 1**  
**Forms, meanings, and cultural variations of “V”<sup>84</sup>**

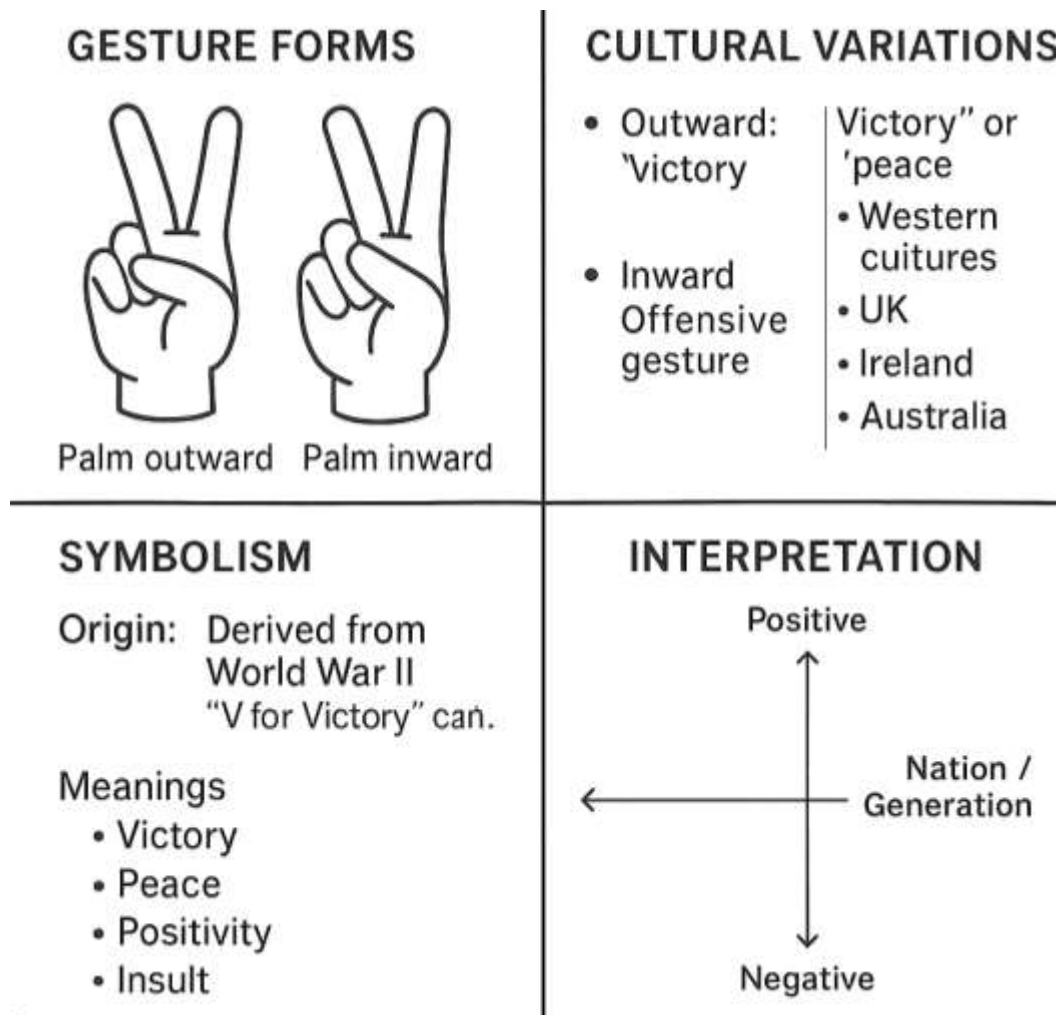
Aspect	Description	Examples / Contexts	Cultural Interpretation
<b>Gesture Form 1</b>	Palm facing <b>outward</b> , index and middle fingers forming a “V”.	Commonly used in photos, greetings, or victory gestures.	<b>Western cultures:</b> “Victory” or “peace” (popularized by Winston Churchill during WWII and 1960s peace movements). <b>East Asia:</b> A cheerful or “cute” expression in photos (especially Japan, Korea).
<b>Gesture Form 2</b>	Palm facing <b>inward</b> (back of	Often used unintentionally by	<b>UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand:</b> Considered

<sup>84</sup> Made by the authors

	hand facing the viewer).	English speakers when ordering “two drinks.”	<b>offensive</b> , equivalent to the middle finger gesture in the U.S.
<b>Historical Origin</b>	Derived from symbolic “V for Victory” campaign during WWII.	Churchill used it as a morale booster. Later reinterpreted by peace activists.	Symbol shifted from <b>victory (war)</b> to <b>peace (anti-war)</b> in the 1960s.
<b>Symbolic Meanings</b>	Depends on orientation and context.	“Victory,” “Peace,” “Positivity,” “Insult.”	<b>Positive or negative</b> depending on direction, nation, and generation.
<b>Media Influence</b>	Spread through celebrities, politicians, and global media.	Photos, pop culture, social media.	Globalized as a <b>friendly gesture</b> , though regional meanings persist.
<b>Misunderstanding Examples</b>	Tourists or politicians misusing the gesture abroad.	Giving inward “V-sign” in the UK thinking it means “peace.”	Can lead to <b>cultural faux pas</b> or offense.
<b>Modern Usage</b>	Common in selfies, emojis, and online communication.	This emoji widely used on social media.	Universally associated with <b>positivity</b> , but older generations may still attach <b>political or historical meanings</b> .

**Semiotic and Intercultural Interpretation.** From a semiotic perspective, gestures act as culturally coded signs—forms whose meanings depend on social agreement rather than inherent features (Kendon, 2017). The V-sign’s dual meaning illustrates the “indexical” nature of nonverbal language, in which interpretation relies on both the gesture itself and its context. Intercultural communication theory emphasizes that nonverbal misinterpretations can cause misunderstanding or offense even when linguistic competence is high (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2017). For instance, an American tourist flashing the

“peace” sign while posing for a photo in London might unintentionally offend local onlookers if the palm is turned inward.



Picture 1. The sign “V” and its illustrative meaning<sup>85</sup>

**Myths and Folklore Surrounding the Gesture.** A popular but unsubstantiated myth claims that English archers originated the two-finger gesture at the Battle of Agincourt (1415), allegedly showing their fingers to the French to prove they could still draw their longbows. Although entertaining, historians find no evidence for this story; the modern

<sup>85</sup> Made by the authors



documented use of the V-sign as an insult appears only in the 19th or early 20th century (Forces News, 2020). This demonstrates how folklore can shape popular understanding of communication symbols even without historical proof.

**Implications for Intercultural Communication.** Understanding gestures like the V-sign is crucial for effective intercultural communication. Educators and travelers should be aware of how orientation and context affect interpretation. In practice, the outward-facing V remains universally positive, while the inward-facing form should be avoided in Commonwealth countries. Developing nonverbal awareness can prevent miscommunication and foster intercultural sensitivity (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2014).

**Conclusion.** The V-sign exemplifies the complex relationship between universal gestures and local cultural meanings. From a wartime emblem of victory to a sign of peace—or insult—the gesture's evolution underscores that nonverbal communication is both powerful and culturally relative. For successful intercultural interaction, speakers must remember that even the simplest gestures carry histories, orientations, and emotional charges that differ across societies.

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